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HOW TO MAKE MIRACLES

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At the outset of our Jewish national existence, at the time of the Exodus, according to Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), doubts about the presence of God in the world were the rule—as expressed in the question, *hayeish Adoshem be-kirbeinu im-ayin* (היש כי בקרבנו אם-איין)—“Is God in our midst or not?” (Exodus 17:7)

All of the *nismim* (ניטים), the “proving acts” that God did then—the plagues, the escape from Egypt, the crossing of the Reed Sea, the manna, and more—seemingly were to establish certain conviction among the people that the Divine Presence was verifiably in the world. Rabbi Hirsch notes that, those *nismim* “. . . sufficed to raise the conviction of God and His presence on earth to a certainty beyond all possibility of doubt for all time.” (Comment on Deuteronomy 6:16) Consequently, according to Rabbi Hirsch, those *nismim* have come to an end.

The replacement of *nismim* as a source of miracles, to maintain the certainty that God is *be-kirbeinu* (בקרבנו), that is, among us, is *us*—each one of us at our “post,” fulfilling the *mitzvot* and thereby, simultaneously, projecting ourselves up into God’s intelligence that is masterminding the world, and drawing the Shechinah down into day-to-day human affairs.

But precisely what role do we have in making miracles? And what events in our history as a people give us insight into answering this question?

Just before Chanukah every year, we read in the Torah (Genesis 33:1-4) of the extraordinary, even miraculous, reunion of Yaakov and Eisav, the twin sons of Yitzchak. Yaakov, having acquired Eisav’s birthright and blessing, thus engendering a murderous hatred in his brother’s heart, had to flee for his life and then spend 20 years working for his uncle Lavan. And everything we know about Eisav tells us that this passage of time, by itself, would not have diminished his hatred and thirst for revenge. Then we hear that Eisav is approaching Yaakov

with 400 men! (Genesis 32:7) And yet, when the two brothers meet they *embrace*, Eisav *kisses* Yaakov, and they *weep together*.

The Chanukah story also tells us about making miracles. That the Jews were able to fend off the might of the Syrian-Greek armies, defeat them repeatedly in battle, and then finally reclaim and re-consecrate the Temple is, seemingly, entirely implausible—miraculous.

But for us, “miraculous” has a far-away quality. Maybe we can acknowledge that something extraordinary happened with Yaakov and Eisav or with the Hasmoneans. But of course, we’re not them. We don’t experience miracles in our time—or do we?

In fact, the history of the Jewish people in the second half of the twentieth century strikes one as so improbable, it seems surreal. How many pundits or prognosticators at the start of the twentieth century would have predicted the Holocaust, the founding of the modern State of Israel, and Israel’s survival after a half-century of Arab rejection and wars, United Nations hostility, and calumny from world bodies such as the Red Cross and International Court of Justice?

All three of these stories—Yaakov and Eisav, the Hasmoneans, and the State of Israel—share an element of the miraculous. Something entirely unexpected happened. They remind us that sometimes the unexpected becomes transformed into something so seemingly ordinary that we regard it as commonplace.

But what was the miracle that occurred in each instance?

In the simplest terms, we may understand such miraculous events as the natural, even predictable outcome of our choosing to use fully all that God gives us, but of which we are typically unaware. When we choose to reach within ourselves for strength and courage that we do *not* believe we possess, when we choose to believe that God has

given us more than we know, enabling us to live in the image of God, then with God's help we create the possibility for extraordinary events.

This is no more or less than what Yaakov did with Eisav, what the Hasmoneans did with the Syrian-Greeks, or what the people of Israel have done in the last half-century.

Of course, that's not the end of the story.

For although Yaakov and Eisav were reunited, Eisav's continuing evil influence in the world was the seedbed for what "Rome" ultimately came to represent—the values associated with conquest and empire, materialism and licentiousness.

And the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem was followed by another 25 years of war with the Syrian-Greeks, the death in battle of all five of the sons of Mattathias, and the usurpation of political power by the Hasmoneans who, as a priestly family, were barred from such pretensions.

And, of course, the challenges to the State of Israel will continue into the indefinite future.

So what then, more precisely, is the "miracle"?

Repeatedly we see people who in biblical, rabbinic, and modern times refuse to give up, refuse to give in, when confronted with overwhelming odds, but instead go on from one battle to the next, generation after generation, standing at their posts.

Certainly that alone is extraordinary.

But equally extraordinary is that this *am katon*, this little people, has had such an historic relationship with such a *sefer gadol*, such a great book that has made its history possible.

The Jewish people, minuscule in numbers, has carried, and thus been carried by, what is acknowledged as the greatest book in all of human history. And the *mattan Torah*, particularly the giving and receiving of the revelation of the *mitzvot*, has accounted more than anything else for that greatness.

We Jews have emerged as the extraordinarily unlikely bearers of the Torah vision of righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness for the whole world—which has not always endeared us to the rest of the world. The Torah, in turn, has miraculously borne us up against a world of implacable enemies and incalculable odds.

Now, in our season of light, when both light and darkness threaten the peoples of the Middle East and possibly the world, we must adamantly refuse to give up bearing that Torah vision.

We, Am Yisrael—through our faith in God and willingness to carry the Torah—must again show the world and ourselves how miracles are made!

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